

INQUEST RESUMED

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CORONER AND CONCEALED DEATH

Horror of Burial "Not Full Explanation"

July 30th 1938

Story Of Birchington Discovery

A verdict of "Death from causes unknown" was recorded by the Margate Coroner (Mr. S. J. Wilson Price) when he resumed at the Town Hall on Monday an inquest on Mrs. Florence Matilda Ward, an aged widow whose body was kept for nearly three months in a Minnis Road, Birchington, house where she had lived in seclusion with her two daughters for thirty years.

Mrs. Ward died on April 21st, and her body was accidentally discovered on July 12th by a man working in the house.

Both daughters gave evidence at the opening of the inquest last week and the elder, Miss Beatrice Sarah Greatrex Ward, explained that they kept the body because their mother had a horror of passing away and being shut in a box under the ground with insects.

In his summing up the Coroner said he did not believe the mother's horror of burial was the full explanation of concealment, because the only source of money they were able to draw on at that time dried up with the death of Mrs. Ward becoming known. He thought that was partly the explanation, although the daughters might have persuaded themselves that it was not the reason, and were quite honest in thinking so.

The two daughters were among those who listened to the evidence at the resumed inquiry.

Since Boyhood

David George Hutchings, of Westfield Road, Birchington, told the Coroner that he had known Mrs. Ward for a good many years, and his sister was formerly maid to her. When he was quite a boy he ran errands for Mrs. Ward and worked in the house after school. He did painting and scrubbing.

He last saw Mrs. Ward about three days before Christmas, when she sent for him to give him the Christmas box which he had every year. He was not in the house again until April 23rd, when he was summoned by postcard which was not in the writing of Mrs. Ward.

Told Of Week's Work

He was spoken to through the letter box by Miss Beatrice Ward, but did not see anyone. She told him she had a week's work for him to do.

The Coroner: Had you ever dealt with Miss Beatrice before?

Witness: I had seen and spoken to her but instructions always came from Mrs. Ward.

He began work on the following Monday, April 25th, where he was asked to clear out the kitchen and scullery. It was a bigger job than he anticipated, and there was so much stuff to shift that he had to ask permission to get help. He obtained the assistance of Mr. Spain, of Gas Row.

Newspapers Thirty Years Old

The rooms were packed with piles of newspapers, including papers thirty years old. Some were taken out as they were and others were removed in sacks because of their condition. Some of the newspapers were full of holes, which he thought had been caused by rats. Two truck loads were burnt on a neighbouring field but neighbours complained of the smell and he had to find another place. There were only newspapers, cardboard boxes and books. No furniture was burnt, but several old chairs were thrown away.

Witness distempered walls and ceilings downstairs, and after clearing a back bedroom, dealt with the conservatory room on the ground floor. It was so packed that he had a job to open the door.

A small front room upstairs was cleaned, but although he distempered the room he did not see much of it, because Miss Ward and Mr. Spain had worked on it and the papers it contained had been packed.

Locked Room

Miss Ward worked all night to clear another room, a little room at the back which he had never seen before. It was locked, and he could never get near the door because it was crammed with newspapers.

The Coroner: During Mrs. Ward's lifetime had you ever been in that room?

Witness: No, never.

On Friday, July 1st, Miss Ward said she would not want him to come again until Monday dinner time. At that time the little back room was still locked. On the Monday he resumed work.

The little back room was in a bad condition. It contained a double bed, but there was no spring, and as one of the bars was broken witness and his assistant threw it out into a field. There were no bedclothes, but two palliasses [straw mattresses] were on the bed.

"Everything Funny"

He thought that rather funny, but everything in the house had been funny for years.

He noticed no particular smell, but at Miss Ward's request the room was disinfected. There was no glass in the window; he had three windows made and was going to put them in. He put new boarding where there were rat holes.

The small front room was locked, or so he imagined. He did not actually try it because piles of newspapers prevented his approach.

The Coroner: Did you not try to get into the room at all?

Witness: I never had a chance because there were piles of paper in front of it.

The Discovery

Eventually you did get in? – Yes.

How did that occur? – While I was at Minnis Bay doing my work, Mr. Spain shifted all the papers to disinfect the landing and that room. I came back at twelve o'clock to see how he was getting on, and after I had had lunch I took him some beer, which he was allowed every day. I went upstairs and saw the door undone, so I opened it. I went inside and saw a bed piled high with brown paper. I lifted one corner of the paper and came out pretty quickly, having seen a leg.

The Coroner: Was the body lying on top of the clothes only covered with brown paper?

Witness: I cannot say.

Didn't you notice when you returned with the doctor? – No.

You were frightened? – Yes. I was.

After the discovery he told Miss Ward that he would not do another thing in the house, and she said, "Why ever didn't you tell me?" He then said he would fetch a doctor.

Daughter Screamed

Miss Ward screamed and rushed up the stairs to lock the door.

He returned to the house with Dr. Bowie, gaining admission with a key given to him by Miss Ward.

The Coroner: During the time you knew the mother was alive did either of the Misses Ward have any dealings with you?

Witness: No. They never had anything at all to do with the business side.

You thought Mrs. Ward was ill? – Yes, I did.

Did you ever suggest that they should have a doctor – Not once, but many times.

What did they say? – They said that when the warm weather comes everyone feels better.

When I demanded to speak that to Mrs. Ward they said she was sleeping. You had always dealt with Mrs. Ward until you went back in April. Didn't you notice any difference in the smell of the house? – No. There was always a funny smell in the house. They burned candles all day.

What did you think you were clearing out the small back bedroom for? – I did not think anything at all.

Before he found the body, he believed on July 8th, he was instructed by Miss Ward to go to Brighton to find out where a doctor was buried, and also to get in touch with his widow if it was possible. He came back to Birchington by car the same evening, and the next day or soon afterwards the daughters went with him in the car.

That happened because they asked him to buy them some hats. He said he could buy almost anything for them but hats, and suggested that they should accompany him in a car with his wife or someone else competent to help them.

The Coroner: Did that not suggest to you that Mrs. Ward might be dead?

Witness: No. I thought she must be quite all right. They said they must get back quickly and that they wanted new hats.

Hats and Coats To Go Out In

What kind of hats? – The hats that are worn today, of any colour. They wanted hats and coats to go out in.

During his evidence Mr. Hutchings described Mrs. Ward as “cultured and one of the kindest ladies in the world.”

“Absolutely Normal”

Would you say that Mrs. Ward was at all eccentric or a little abnormal? – Absolutely normal. She had funny ideas.

There was no question of her being kept in the house by her daughters? – Definitely not.

There was no restraint at all? – No. I should imagine vice versa.

I suppose you suspected she was dead? – No. They used to talk to each other every day. I asked daily, and they always said everyone felt better when the weather got warmer.

No Suspicious

That was a curious answer. Did you not suspect anything? – No.

If anyone had asked you what you really thought you would have had to answer that you thought she was dead, would you not? – No. I thought she was very ill, but not dead.

Thomas Gibson Adams, of 12 Prospect Road, Birchington, said he had known Mrs. Ward “in a sense” for ten years. He had only seen her twice, but she had spoken through the letter box.

He went to the house every noon and night, in the first instance to prevent boys and girls from annoying Mrs. Ward and throwing stones at the windows.

“Vague Form”

He last saw her, or rather a vague form through the letter box, about the end of January or the beginning of February.

On that occasion he thought he heard something fall, and called through the letter box, “Has anything happened madam?” She said, “Nothing much.”

He fancied that one of the daughters helped her to the door. About a week afterwards Mrs. Ward told him she had sprained her ankle. He advised her to rest it and as she did not come to the door again he thought she was doing so.

Witness had only been in the house once, and that was five or six years ago. After he last saw Mrs. Ward the door was answered by the daughters. He kept asking how their mother was getting on, and was told that she was a little better. He also had the same answer as was given to Mr. Hutchings. He had no suspicion that she was dead.

Coroner's Summing Up

Recording a verdict of "Death from causes unknown" the Coroner said the inquest would probably not have been necessary if a doctor had known about the death of Mrs. Ward. Unfortunately, it did not become known to anyone except the two daughters until several months afterwards, and by that time it was quite impossible to ascertain definitely what the cause of death was.

There were no external signs of injury, but there might conceivably be other possibilities, so the fullest investigation had been necessary. Mrs. Ward and her two daughters lived a life somewhat shut off from the rest of the community, and Mrs. Ward had several attacks of what Miss Ward described as influenza, the last beginning just before Christmas. The illness might have been influenza, but it was impossible to say because no doctor was called in. Towards the end Mrs. Ward became bedridden and refused to eat, and then, as Miss Ward had said, she died in bed.

From that time onward the body of the deceased woman remained in a back room of the house, Mr. Hutchings was working in the house from time to time but although he suspected that something was wrong with Mrs. Ward he did not evidently, suspect that she had died and certainly did not know that she had died. When he asked questions he was repeatedly answered in a way that did not give him much information.

Eventually, by accident almost, he discovered the body and reported it to a doctor, and then the matter was investigated. One inquired, therefore, into the surrounding circumstances to see what light they might throw on the cause of death which was the main object of the inquiry.

Preparing For Death?

"If Miss Ward is telling the truth when she says that her mother did not stumble, but only said that she had done so, it looks as if Mrs. Ward was preparing for her own illness or for her death by providing an "explanation for not appearing as she had done in the past." continued the Coroner.

"One does ask oneself how it came about that the death was not made public until it was discovered accidentally. Miss Ward tells me that the reason for that was that her mother did not want to be buried in the ground, and as it was their mother they thought they would do as she wished and keep her as long as they could.

That may be partly the explanation, but in my opinion it is not the full explanation, because it appears from what Miss Ward candidly said that the only source of income they were able to draw on at that time was money that belonged to their mother, and on her death becoming known that source would immediately dry up.

"In Their Interests to Conceal"

I understand that there was money belonging to them, but at the same time they could not get that money as things were at that time. Consequently I think it was in their interests to conceal the death, and I cannot help thinking that that was partly the explanation of it.

It may be that both of them had persuaded themselves that that was not the reason, and were quite honest in thinking so, but to my mind it had some influence on them.

That is important in this way. If it was in their interests to conceal her death it was certainly to their interests to preserve her life and from that fact and from what they have

told me I am quite satisfied that they had a full affection for their mother, and that this death was not in any way caused by them.

For this reason, probably, it was a natural death. It is impossible to say for certain, but the probabilities point in that direction. At the same time it is possible that if a doctor had been called in during her lifetime she might have recovered.

No Intentional Neglect

“Why they did not call in a doctor I do not know, I think probably the reason they gave – that they thought they were doing all that could be done – was the true reason. I am quite satisfied that there was no intentional neglect. It must be remembered that the daughters had led a sheltered life, had not been out of the house very much during a long number of years and that their experience of life outside the house was small.

I think in the circumstances that I ought to record this death as being the death of Florence Matilda Ward without going on to add that she was the widow of John Ward. That may be so, but neither of the daughters is able to say more than Mrs. Ward told them, and in case there are any questions of property or money involved, it is inadvisable for me to decide definitely that fact.

The verdict will be death from causes unknown. I might, perhaps, say that I am sorry to have to go into matters of this kind at such length, but it is inevitable in a case where the cause of death is unknown and death is not discovered until some time afterwards.

The Funeral

The Misses Beatrice and Gertrude Ward, with Mr D. G. Hutchings, attended the funeral of Mrs. Ward at Hove Cemetery on Friday.

A Roman Catholic priest officiated.



“Homefield”, 8 Minnis Road



The photo above shows the kitchen being renovated.

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The photo on the left shows one of the bedrooms being modernised.